

The syntax of ‘nothing’ in Old English
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1 INTRODUCTION

	stage I	stage II	stage III	stage I’
English	ic ne secge (Old English)	I ne seye not (Middle English)	I say not (Early Modern English)	I don’t say (Present-day English)

Table 1. Schematic representation of Jespersen’s cycle

English grammaticalizes *not* < *noht* < *nōwiht/nāwiht* ‘nothing, no creature’ as its new negator via reanalyses pronoun > adverb > negator, ignoring other possible items e.g. *nānra þinga*, *nāteshwōn* ‘not at all’, *nā* ‘never, not at all’ (on the syntax of *nā*, see van Kemenade 1999, Rissanen 1999). [A secondary Jespersen’s cycle with *never* occurs in some varieties, Lucas & Willis 2012.]

The development negative indefinite > marker of sentential negation is crosslinguistically well-attested being found also in Dutch, German, Old Norse, Middle Welsh, Piedmontese, Greek, North African Arabic dialects, Central Atlas Tamazight Berber, and perhaps Hungarian (Willis, Lucas & Breitbarth 2013:14).

Recruitment of *not* as a negative marker was probably a two-stage process (cf. van Kemenade 2000, Wallage 2005):

- indefinite pronoun > VP-adjoined adverb
- integration into the negation system as specifier of NegP

The first of these developments is not sufficient to trigger full Jespersen’s cycle, since conventionalized adverbial reinforcers of negation may retain their status indefinitely. The second had probably already occurred by early Middle English: Haeberli & Ingham (2007) show word-order asymmetries between adverbs and *not*, and conclude that *not* is therefore already (structurally) a negator in early Middle English (1150–1250).

How, when and why did Old English *nāwiht* become an adverb in the first place (the first reanalysis)? Was it already a negative adverb in Old English? Or was it still a nominal argument? Ingham (2013: 123–4): ‘evidence for this [use of *nāwiht* as a negative adverb] in Old English is very slim’. Crosslinguistic parallels put this question into perspective. Use of *nāwiht* in Old English is actually quite constrained.

2 BRIDGING CONTEXTS FOR INCIPIENT JESPERSEN’S CYCLE

Breitbarth, Lucas & Willis (2013) suggest a set of bridging contexts in which the acquisitional ambiguity necessary to initiate incipient Jespersen’s cycle may be present in a given language. Not all environments are found in all languages at this stage, and their relative importance is unclear, but all can be hypothesized in a number of different language histories.

(i) optionally transitive verbs e.g. English *eat*, *drink*, *read*, *write*, where the transitive and intransitive use may be equivalent e.g. Lucas (2007) on the history of Arabic:

- (1) akalt al-xubz
 eat.PAST.2MSG the-bread
 ‘Did you eat the bread?’ (Lucas 2007: 420)

- (2) la mā akalt šay'
 no NEG eat.PAST.1SG thing(/NEG)
 'No, I didn't eat (anything/any)'. (Lucas 2007: 420)

(ii) predicates taking an optional extent/degree argument; informally, these may be divided into various classes (there may be others):

(a) verbs of succeeding

(b) verbs of caring and indifference

Hoeksema (1994) notes that the negative indefinite pronoun (extent argument) *niets* and the negator *niet* are interchangeable with certain verbs/predicates of indifference in Dutch (with *niets* being a stronger, more emphatic/emotive option):

- (3) Das hat ihn nicht / nichts / wenig gekümmert.
 that has him not nothing little bother.PAST.PTCP
 'That didn't bother him (at all, much).' (adapted from Bayer 2009: 11)
- (4) Dat kan me niet / niets / weinig schelen.
 that can me not / nothing little differ.INF
 'I don't care about that.' (adapted from Hoeksema 1994: 277)

(c) verbs of harming e.g. *argywedu* 'injure, harm' is problematic for Middle Welsh:

- (5) heb arguwedu [sic] **dim** ar y Gwidyl.
 without harm.INF nothing on the Irish
 'without harming the Irish (nothing)'. (Middle Welsh, Willis 2006: 75)

3 NEGATIVE DEGREE MODIFIERS OF ADVERBS AND ADJECTIVES

Negative indefinites often develop into narrow-scope negators of adjectives. This seems to happen more readily in languages that permit phrases of the type [_{DP} NOTHING [_{NP} noun(.GEN)]]], which may be the source. English allows this to a very limited extent:

- (6) I know the Mayor and he looks nothing like that. (Bayer 2009: 6)
 (7) A dodo flies nothing like that. (Bayer 2009: 6)
 (8) He looks absolutely nothing like that.

Integrating this into the system of degree expression developed by Neeleman, van de Koot & Doetjes (2004), we get:

- (9)
- ```

 DegP
 / \
 XP Deg'
 absolutely
 / \
 Deg AP
 nothing
 / \
 A DP
 like that

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Other languages do this somewhat more productively (with a degree of interspeaker variability):

- (10) Aber ich war nichts zufrieden.  
 but I was nothing satisfied  
 'But I wasn't satisfied at all.' (Bayer 2009:12)
- (11) Hij was niets tevreden over het antwoord.  
 he was nothing satisfied about the answer  
 'He wasn't at all satisfied with the answer.'

- (12) Njegova krivda ni nič manjša.  
his guilt NEG.be.PRS.3SG nothing less  
'His guilt is no less.' (*Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika*, s.v. nič)
- (13) Ali nisi nič vesela?  
QU NEG.be.PRS.2SG nothing happy.FSG  
'Aren't you happy?' (Nova Beseda Corpus, IC HMP 1739)

Possible bridging contexts for the adjective specifier?

- (14) We [VP [VP did nothing] better] today than yesterday. ⇒  
We [VP [VP did] [AP nothing better]] today than yesterday.
- (15) Es hätte in Suzuka nichts besser gemacht werden können.  
it had.PAST.SUBJ.3SG in Suzuka nothing better done become can  
'Nothing could have been done better in Suzuka.'

Use of *no* for this in English goes back to Old English use of *nā/nō* 'never' here:

- (16) ...butan he geladige, þæt he **na bet** ne cuðe.  
unless he make.oath.PRS.SBJV.3SG that he no better NEG know.PAST.3SG  
'unless he provides an oath that he knew no better.' (colaw2cn, LawIICn:15.1.42)
- (17) Ac ic þe halsige ðæt ðu me **no leng** ne lette...  
but I you entreat.PRS.1SG that you me no longer NEG impede.PRS.SBJV.2SG  
'But I entreat you that you no longer impede me...' (coboeth, Bo:36.105.31.2056)

#### 4 INCIPIENT JESPERSEN'S CYCLE AS ATTESTED IN CONTEMPORARY VARIETIES

- indefinite pronouns probably 'leak' from argument use via the contexts in sections 2 and 3, with actual Jespersen's cycle beginning once this use goes beyond degree arguments
- we see distributions consistent with this scenario in contemporary languages e.g. German has significant leakage in (20) and (21):

- (18) aber das hat mir nichts geholfen.  
but that has me.DAT nothing helped  
'...but that didn't help me at all.' (Bayer 2009: 16)
- (19) Das hat ihm nichts / nicht geschadet.  
that has him.DAT nothing not damages  
'That did him no damage.' (Bayer 2009: 11)
- (20) Karl hat nichts gearbeitet.  
Karl has nothing worked  
'Karl has done no work.' (Bayer 2009: 11)
- (21) Von Freitag auf Samstag hab ich aber fast nichts geschlafen.  
from Friday to Saturday have I however almost nothing slept  
'However, between Friday and Saturday I hardly slept.' (internet, Bayer 2009:12)

Dutch is more conservative:

- (22) De verklaring hielp niets.  
the explanation helped nothing  
'The explanation didn't help at all.'
- (23) Dat heeft het huis niets beschadigd.  
that has the house nothing damaged  
'That hasn't damage the house at all/one bit.'
- (24) %Ik heb dus bijna niets geslapen, steeds maar herhaald  
I have thus almost nothing slept always but repeated

in mijn hoofd wat er gezegd was.  
 in my head what there said was  
 'So I almost didn't sleep at all, but kept on repeating in my mind what had been said.' (Bayer 2009:14, revised judgment)

Slovene leaks to emphatic negation of the imperative of imperfective verbs in (27), and emphatic negation of some other scalar verbs in (28) [.PAST.PTCP = past participle]:

- (25) Nič ni pomagala razlaga.  
 nothing NEG.be.PRS.3SG help.PAST.PTCP explanation  
 'The explanation didn't help at all.'
- (26) Zanje se ni brigal nič...  
 Zanje REFL NEG.be.PRS.3SG care.PAST.PTCP nothing  
 'Zanje didn't care (at all)...' (Nova Beseda Corpus, IC HMP 1571)
- (27) Nič ne jokaj.  
 nothing NEG cry.IMP.2SG  
 'Don't cry (one bit).' (Nova Beseda Corpus, IC HMP 179)
- (28) Nič ni spala.  
 nothing NEG.be.PRS.3SG sleep.PAST.PTCP  
 'She didn't sleep at all.'

## 5 OLD ENGLISH

- Old English has the conditions for the emergence of incipient Jespersen's cycle with *noht/naht/nawiht/nowiht*
- what we actually observe is almost entirely consistent with (mere) incipient Jespersen's cycle, with the language on the cusp of the transition to stage II of the cycle
- discussion provisional – based on first 121 instances of *noht/naht/nawiht/nowiht* in the YCOE (8 texts, mainly Ælfric, Bede, Blickling homilies)

### 5.1 Optionally transitive verbs

- in 65 cases (54%) *nāwiht* is straightforwardly used as an argument
- of these, 4 involve optionally transitive verbs (*singan* 'sing' (twice), *geseōn* 'see' and *cwēðan* 'say') plus 3 where it is the object of a premodal:

- (29) Cedmon, **sing me hwæthwugu**. þa ondswarede he & cwæð: Ne con Cædmon sing me something then answered he andsaid NEG can ic **noht singan**; & ic forþon of þeossum gebeorscipe uteode, I nothing sing and I therefore from this entertainment withdrew & hider gewat, forþon ic **naht singan** ne cuðe. and to.here left because I nothing sing NEG could  
 'Cedmon, sing me something.' Then he answered and said: 'I cannot sing anything; and for this reason I withdrew from this entertainment and left for here, because I could not sing (anything).'
- (30) þa **ne dorste** se heahgerefa **naht** on gearum þa hæðengyldan then NEG dare.PAST.3SG the high.reeve nothing against the heathens  
 'then the high reeve dared not [do] anything against the heathens' (oelive, +ALS [Agnes]:211.1857)

### 5.2 Degree arguments

- in 14 cases (12%), *nāwiht* functions as a degree argument with verbs of succeeding (7 cases), verbs of harming (4 cases) or verbs of caring (3 cases):

- (31) & he **nowiht fromade** in his lare and he nothing succeed.PAST.3SG in his teaching  
 'and he had no success in his teaching' (cobede, Bede\_3:3.162.24.1566)

- (32) & se deofol ne mihte **naht** **derian** pam menn.  
and the devil NEG could nothing harm.INF the man.DAT  
'and the devil could do the man no harm.' (coaelhom, +AHom\_18:293.2654)
- (33) We þeah rædað, þæt munecum eallunga to windrince **naht**  
we though read.PRS.1PL that monks.DAT altogether to wine-drinking nothing  
**ne belimpe...**  
NEG concern.PRS.SBJV.3SG  
'We nevertheless read that drinking wine does not concern monks altogether at all.' (cobenrul, BenR:40.64.21.794)

- note the parallel here with other possible items that may express degree with verbs from the \*fram- 'succeed' root, e.g. *micclum* 'greatly' or *lytel* 'little':

- (34) Oncnaw nu and ongit þæt hit þe sceal **lytel fremigen**,  
recognize now and understand that it you.DAT shall little avail.INF  
þæt þu topohtest.  
that you intended  
'Now recognize and understand that it will help you little, what you intended.'  
(conicodC, Nic\_[C]:30.29)

- the degree word may be questioned by *hwæt* 'what':

- (35) **Hwæt fremað** pam blindan seo beorhta sunbeam?  
what avail.PRS.3SG the blind.DAT the bright sunbeam.NOM  
'How/what does the bright sunbeam help the blind person?' (coaelive, +ALS  
[Julian\_and\_Basilissa]:274.1107)

- these provide a basis for the first reanalysis but are not evidence that it has occurred

### 5.3 Constituent or narrow-focus negation of adjectives and adverbs

We distinguish constituent negation from narrow-focus negation:

- (36) There are some pretty villages not far from here. (constituent)  
(37) Mary isn't going TO PARIS this weekend. (narrow-focus)

- the former fails tests for sentential negation, while the latter passes them e.g. continuation with a neither-tag (Klima 1964), paraphrase with 'I say of X that it is not true that Y' (Payne 1985):

- (38) #There are some pretty villages not far from here, and neither are there pretty hills. (constituent)  
(39) Mary isn't going to Paris this weekend, and neither am I. (narrow-focus)
- (40) #I say of pretty villages that it is not true that there are some far from here.'  
(41) 'I say of Mary that it is not true that she is going to Paris this weekend.'

- narrow-focus negation, although an instance of sentential negation, indicates that, if the focused constituent were changed appropriately, the sentence would be true e.g. 'Mary is going to Copenhagen this weekend' might be true (see Jäger 2008: 20–23 for this in the history of German).
- we have 22 cases (18%) with constituent negation of adverbs or adjectives and 12 (9%) with narrow-focus negation with focus on adverbs or adjectives (12 cases)
- narrow-focus negation always shows negative concord with *ne*, while constituent negation always lacks it cf. the narrow-focus/constituent negator *nalles* in Old High German, which behaves this way too (Jäger 2008)

- (42) þæt mynster wæs geworden & getimbred **noht micle** ær  
the monastery was founded and built nothing much before  
'The monastery was founded and erected, not long before...' (cobede,  
Bede\_4:24.332.23.3338) (constituent negation)
- (43) Ða wæs in sumum tune **noht feorr** sum ging ðearfa...  
there was in some hamlet not far some young pauper  
'There was in some hamlet not far (away) a certain young pauper...' (cobede,  
Bede\_5:2.388.14.3858) (constituent negation)
- (44) Forðæm ic þæt cuðlice wat, þæt seo stow **noht lange** æmettig  
because I that truly know that the place nothing long empty  
**ne** wunað...  
NEG remain.PRS.3SG  
'Because I truly know what the place won't stay empty long.' (cobede,  
Bede\_4:31.376.21.3765) (narrow-focus negation)
- (45) And þa gewilnunge **naht lange ne** ylde  
and the desire nothing long NEG delayed  
'And that desire delayed not long/didn't delay long.' (coapollo, ApT:1.10.8)

This forces a reinterpretation of some conclusions about Old English word order e.g. Rissanen (1999: 190) cites the following as an example of a pronominal subject preceding (sentential) negation in Old English:

- (46) ne dorste he **nawuht hrædlice** ut of ðære ceastre faran upon  
NEG dared he nothing quickly out of the city go.INF upon  
ða muntas.  
the mountains  
'He did not dare to go quickly out of the city up to the mountains.' (*Cura pastoralis* 397)

#### 5.4 True leakage?

This leaves a 6 cases of possible adverbial *noht*:

- (47) & hie seopþan ealle worlde wean & ealle þreatas  
and they afterwards all world.GEN sorrow and all threats  
oforhogodan, & him nowiht fore ne ondredon...  
disregard.PAST.3PL and them nothing for NEG be.afraid.PAST.3PL  
'...and they afterwards disregarded all the world's sorrow and all threats, and they did not frighten them at all...' (coblick, HomS\_46\_[BIHom\_11]:119.57.1514)
- possibly *nowiht* is the object of *fore*, the latter acting as a postposition, hence '(not) on account of anything'
- (48) þa wurdon þa opre awrehte mid þam sange and naht  
then become.PAST.3PL the others concerned with the song and nothing  
heora gold hordas þe hi healdan sceoldon hæbbende næron  
their gold hordes REL they keep.INF should.3PL having NEG.be.PAST.3PL  
'Then the others were concerned with the song and were not possessing their gold hordes which they should have guarded.' (coaelive, +ALS\_[Martin]:1481.6947)
- either *naht* is the object of *hæbbende* (i.e. 'having none of their treasure') or this is constituent negation, so not adverbial
  - four examples provide good evidence of use of *nāwihht* as an emphatic negative adverb, involving the verbs *gefrēdsan* 'feel, perceive' (two instances), *tweōgan* 'doubt', and *gemunan* 'remember, bear in mind':

- (49) ...me þincð þæt ...þu mine yrmðe **naht** **ne** gefredst.  
 me.DAT seems that youmy misery nothing NEG feel.PRS.2SG  
 'It seems to me that you are playing and you do not perceive/feel my misery.'  
 (coaelhom, +AHom\_27:89.3980)
- (50) ...þæt ðu þas dyntas **naht** **ne** gefretst...  
 that you those blows nothing NEG feel.PRS.2SG  
 'that you do not feel those blows at all' (coaelive,  
 +ALS\_[Julian\_and\_Basilissa]:146.1027)
- (51) **Ne twygeo** ic þonne mec **noht** æfterþæs lichoman deaðe  
 NEG doubt.PRS.1SG I then me.ACC nothing after the body.GEN death  
 hræðe gelæd beon to þam ecan deaðe minre sawle &  
 swiftly carried be.INF to the eternal death.DAT my soul.GEN and  
 helle tintregu underðeoded ne beon.  
 hell.GEN torments subjected NEG be.INF  
 'I have no doubt that, after the death of this body, I shall be carried swiftly to the  
 eternal death of my soul and be subjected to hell's torments.' [Translation of  
 Latin *Nec dubito me post mortem corporis statim ad perpetuam animae mortem  
 rapiendum, ac infernalibus subdendum esse tormentis.*] (cobede,  
 Bede\_3:11.190.21.1921)
- (52) þonne hwæpereæt pære halgan Elizabet seo hire gebyrd **naht**  
 then qu at the holy Elizabeth this her condition nothing  
**gemunan** þe heo hire on ylda þa wære?  
 remember.INF REL she her.DAT on old.age there be.PAST.SBJV.3SG  
 'With regard to the holy Elizabeth, ought not her condition in her advanced years  
 ever be borne in mind?' (coblick, LS\_12\_[NatJnBapt[BHHom\_14]]:163.41.2067)

- suggests minor 'leakage' like Present-day German

## 6 CONCLUSION

- (i) in these texts, *nāwiht* is overwhelmingly used in contexts that do not imply the emergence of an emphatic negative adverb by reanalysis;
- (ii) a substantial proportion of cases do, however, require us to posit the development of a constituent and narrow-focus negator, largely limited to positions modifying adverbs, quantifiers or adjectives;
- (iii) the frequency of potential bridging contexts for emergence of adverbial *nāwiht* is 17% of the total tokens of *nāwiht* (21 out of 121), a substantial body of evidence for an acquirer to base a reanalysis on, lending credence to the role of these contexts in facilitating the early impetus for Jespersen's cycle, both in English and, by extension, crosslinguistically;
- (iv) 'leakage', that is, use of the negative indefinite pronoun beyond the core of extent-argument verbs exists, but at levels similar to what is likely to be found in some present-day languages that are not usually characterized by linguists as being at stage II of Jespersen's cycle.

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## APPENDIX

| function                                                 | no. of attestations |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| subject                                                  | 9                   |
| direct object                                            | 45                  |
| [of which, direct object of optionally transitive verb   | 4 ]                 |
| [of which, direct object of modal                        | 3 ]                 |
| object of preposition                                    | 5                   |
| complement of 'be' or '(be) worth'                       | 6                   |
| <b>total argument</b>                                    | <b>65</b>           |
| extent argument of verb of succeeding                    | 7                   |
| extent argument of verb of harming                       | 4                   |
| extent argument of verb of caring                        | 3                   |
| <b>total argument</b>                                    | <b>14</b>           |
| constituent negation of adverb, quantifier or adjective  | 22                  |
| other constituent negation                               | 1                   |
| narrow-focus negation of adverb, quantifier or adjective | 12                  |
| <b>total constituent and narrow-focus negation</b>       | <b>35</b>           |
| <b>adverb</b>                                            | <b>6</b>            |
| <b>other</b>                                             | <b>1</b>            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                             | <b>121</b>          |

**Table 2. Distribution of functions of *nāwiht* in the Old English texts examined.**